

*To the Hon. Secy of the
General Assembly
1824.*

REMARKS

ON THE QUESTION,

ARE THERE ANY CIRCUMSTANCES

IN WHICH

THE LIFTING OF THE DEAD

IS JUSTIFIABLE?

BY ALIQUIS.

"Non sibi, sed orbi."

THE PROFITS TO BE GIVEN TO THE GLASGOW ROYAL
INFIRMARY.

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P R E F A C E.

ALTHOUGH several months have elapsed, since the occasion which elicited the following remarks, the Author has thought proper to present them to the public in their original form. For what reason, it will be asked, is such a disagreeable theme brought before the public in any shape?—the answer is shortly this, because (for obvious reasons) no other person has come forward to maintain that side of the question, which a regard to truth, the importance of the subject, and the peculiar aspect of the times demand.

We are fully aware of the unpopularity of the task which we have undertaken, and of the calumny which it will unquestionably call forth; but we have not yet learned to conceal the truth, when the happiness and lives of human beings are at stake.

It is obvious, that unless our schools of anatomy are supplied with subjects for dissection, the most affecting proofs of the melancholy and fatal consequences to society from an ignorance of anatomy on the part of surgical practitioners, will ere long be exhibited.

It is useless to urge, that there have been opportunities for studying anatomy hitherto—the present aspect of the

times is such, as to threaten the total extinction of anatomical studies in this country. Numerous and virulent attacks have lately been made, not only on the mode of procuring subjects, but in some instances even on the utility of the science itself. Erroneous reports have been industriously circulated, the manifest tendency of which is to prevent the acquisition of that knowledge, which, in many cases, is indispensably necessary to the preservation of life. Whether these unremitting hostilities have proceeded from a principle commendable in itself on the score of justice, or been the result of sympathetic affection towards the mouldering remains of our once social companions, or whether in some instances they have originated in sinister motives; are questions which we leave to be discussed by those who have inclination. Far be it from us to reprobate those tender feelings of our nature, which burst forth on the recollection of departed friends, or on the mischances incident to exhumation—we trust feelings of this kind will never be eradicated from the minds of our countrymen.

If the following remarks tend, in any degree, to call the attention of those invested with power, to this question, so as that *subjects* may be procured for the anatomical institutions of the country, they will have served the purpose for which they were written.

Glasgow, January, 1824.

REMARKS.

WHILE defending the affirmative of this question, we plead not the cause of any charlatan, who would mutilate the mortal remains of the noblest work of the Deity.

What we contend for is, that in our schools of anatomy, under the superintendence of men of known and acknowledged ability, where the student may be directed in his inquiries, the dissection of the human body is indispensably necessary, for the attainment of that knowledge which has for its object the alleviation of suffering, and the preservation of life; and that, till legal or sufficient provision is made, for supplying such institutions with subjects for dissection, there are circumstances in which it is justifiable to lift the dead.

Though all that is necessary to establish this position is but to make out a case of necessity, yet we consider that the affirmative of the question cannot be illustrated in a more acceptable manner, than by discussing in detail the arguments that have been adduced against it; bringing into view the false premises laid down by our opponents; and the consequently erroneous conclusions to which they have led.

It has been alleged, that to exhumate for the purpose of dissection, is unjustifiable, because the ancients neither dissected the human body, nor lifted the dead for that purpose. Did we think it necessary to the elucidation of this question, the fallacy of the above allegation could easily be established: we could prove, that the ancients did dissect the human body.

Hippocrates, who lived four centuries prior to the Christian era, must either have dissected the human body, or received his information from others who did so, because he gives descriptions of parts peculiar to man, the knowledge of which can be obtained only by actual dissection.

The anatomists of Alexandria in Egypt, were supplied with human subjects for dissection by the monarchs of that country; and it is worthy of remark, that during the reign of the Ptolemies, the anatomists of that remote period divided the nerves, into those that form the organs of sense, and others that operate on the organs of motion.

But we admit, that the lifting of the dead for the purpose of dissection may have been unknown to the nations of antiquity. What then? Let our opponents avail themselves of this circumstance, and if it proves any thing, it proves too much; for in the very same manner they might argue, not only against the dissection of the human body, or the lifting of the dead for that purpose, but against many other improvements of modern times, because such things were unknown to the ancients; they might also endeavour to persuade us to abandon the use of steam as a moving power, to pull down our hospitals and infirmaries, and to exterminate from this island all the other splendid and useful monuments of our public and private beneficence.

It is also alleged, that it is unjustifiable to lift dead bodies for dissection, because to do so, is to act in opposition to public opinion, and at the same time, we are reminded that public opinion, is powerful and mighty in its effects. Far be it from us to speak either lightly or contemptuously of public opinion; to do so, would indicate on our part an ignorance, not only of human nature, but of the history of mankind.

It is not necessary that we should ransack the annals of antiquity, to arrive at a knowledge of the fact, that public opinion is powerful. We know, that public opinion defeated the mad emperor Paul of Russia, though aided by hosts of armed barbarians, in an attempt to regulate the beards and whiskers of his subjects. It was public opinion, which put

to the rout the no less despotic Joseph of Austria, in a matter of as trivial importance; and we need not be reminded, that public opinion has kept in check, and chastened the despotism of the Sultan, at the threshold of his palace in Constantinople. But while we thus decidedly agree in admitting that public opinion is powerful, we are far from allowing that its demands ought at all times to be complied with, or, that in its effects, it is always conducive to the well-being of civil society. There is a difference, indeed, between our admission of the fact, that public opinion is mighty in its influence, and of conceding to the doctrine, that its requests ought at all times, and in all circumstances, to be granted, or that in its consequences, it has in every case a tendency to promote the happiness of mankind.

Were we to enumerate all the baneful results arising from the operations of public opinion, they would only be a detail of the follies and miseries of our race. We merely ask, what were the consequences of public opinion in the days of Carthaginian greatness, when hundreds of children were torn from the bosoms of their mothers, and thrown alive into the furnace of their god Saturn? What was the result of public opinion during the period of Roman grandeur, when thousands of men were mangled and slaughtered by the hands of one another, in their places of public amusement? What was public opinion in this island three centuries ago? Part of it was—the sun runs round the earth; a wafer is a god; and every wrinkled old woman is in compact with the devil. Had we been alive in that opinionative age, and defended the affirmative of this question, (though we might not have had the honour to be burned as heretics, or drowned as necromancers,) we assuredly would have been tortured to death as wicked wretches in the crucible of public opinion. What does public opinion demand in this country? One of its demands, *which ought surely to be complied with*, is, that the members of the medical profession should be sent out to their work ignorant of anatomy, (for what else does opposition amount to?) and it requires no nice calculation to estimate

the evils which would flow from a compliance with such a demand.

“ But to lift the dead for anatomical purposes is unjustifiable, because it is contrary to law.” To all who are unable or unwilling to look beyond the fact, that laws are not unalterable, this argument will appear an insuperable barrier. Whether the law in this case was enacted to prevent the lifting of the dead for dissection, or for the purpose of putting an end to the more unjustifiable practice of digging up dead bodies to be devoured by wild beasts, or buried with ignominy, as was done even in this country not long ago, is of little importance, in as far as concerns the point at issue. If the law against the lifting of the dead, has a direct tendency to prevent the acquisition of that knowledge, which is indispensably necessary to the preservation of life, and the alleviation of suffering, then there may be circumstances, in which “ that law would be more honoured in its breach than in its observance.”

But, as in morals, example goes before precept, so does illustration in some cases excel abstract reasoning: we may render the point at issue more clear by the following simile.

Suppose you are going along a road, and in an adjoining field you see a man heedlessly making towards the edge of a tremendous precipice, and that owing to circumstances over which you have no control, you must approach towards him, or he must inevitably perish. What would you do in this case? O, you are ready to exclaim, we would run and rescue him. But suppose also, that he is in enclosed ground, and that there is a slight fence between you and the object of your commiseration, and an intimation board, stating that all trespassers will be punished according to law: how would you act in these circumstances—what ought you to do? Advance a single step, and you make a breach in a barrier rendered sacred by the lawgivers of your country; remain where you are, and you break through that law which is anterior to all human enactments, that law of our nature, which constrains us to render assistance to a fellow-creature in

peril of his life, and which law would instantaneously impel you to leap over the fence, and rescue him from destruction.

Perhaps it may be said, that admitting the validity of this reasoning, what connection has it with the question? The answer will be found in our reply to the next assertion, *i. e.* it is unjustifiable to lift the dead in any circumstances, because the dissection of the human body is not necessary. Our opponents hesitate not to affirm, that the only reason which can be assigned for human dissection is, that were there no *subjects* there would be no lectures, and were there no lectures there would be no fees.

It is possible that those who use this language intend only to excite laughter, for we know that ridicule is a *sine qua non* with many on all occasions; but judging from circumstances, it is our opinion, that they are serious in believing this concatenation of consequences, and they plume themselves in having discovered the *secret*, probably with as much elation as was indicated by the renowned Munchausen, when, at a single shot, he transfixed a whole flock of geese with his ramrod. To every one, however, who is capable of reflection, it is obvious that the language to which we have alluded, belongs more to that species of eloquence called mock oratory, than to any thing having the semblance of dispassionate investigation. To those who have a knowledge of anatomy, it will appear as much a work of supererogation on our part, were we to say much concerning the necessity of a correct anatomical knowledge in every surgical practitioner, as if we were to demonstrate that the whole is greater than a part. But it is frequently asserted, that accurate anatomical knowledge, on the part of surgical practitioners, is not necessary. Be it so. Suppose then, the case of a person, who has had the misfortune to get a bone, or other hard substance, into his gullet, and that it has been impeded in his œsophagus. Suppose, also, that a practitioner is sent for, who is ignorant of anatomy; if he fails in the attempt to take out the obstructing substance, as a der-

nier resort, he will endeavour to force it down, but he may only impact it more firmly ; does any one imagine that he will have recourse to his scalpel, that he will cut into the œsophagus ? no, truly—his reputation, as well as the life of the patient, is at stake. Were he to have the temerity to do so, almost to a certainty, he would injure some large vessel, or nerve, or both, which would destroy the patient : but, if skilled in the anatomy of the parts, he would, with perfect safety, lay open the œsophagus, and remove the obstructing substance.

But perhaps our opponents are chuckling all the while, and are ready to inform us, that they never allow bones, nor any hard substance whatever, to go down into their gullets, nor even to get posterior to the *Velum Pendulum Palati* ; neither are they in danger from any thing passing into their windpipes, nor are they liable to suspended respiration, so as to stand in need of the operation of tracheotomy.

This may be all very true ; but every one is not to be so fortunate : and besides, if they are in the habit of yawning, or subject to fits of ennui, their lower jaws may be luxated ; and if they have not the assistance of a person who has a practical acquaintance with the anatomy of the parts, with condyles and other connections, unless he be aware of the office performed by a pair of the pterygoid muscles, there is a risk of their grinders being heard no more.

Is it requisite that we should insist on the necessity of accurate anatomical knowledge on the part of surgical Practitioners, that they may be enabled, successfully, to grapple with the immense variety of accidents, to which our mortal frames are every day exposed ? Must we advert to its paramount importance in cases of dislocation ? &c. Not speaking of the many operations that are necessary, as the only alternative between life and death : the performance of which, if unaccompanied with correct anatomical information, on the part of the operator, would in many cases, be only the patient's passport to eternity.

We maintain, that were it for no other purpose, than to

arrive at an intimate acquaintance with the sanguiferous system, the dissection of the human subject is necessary for the prolongation of life.

The blood-vessels are innumerable: some of them are of such a magnitude, that if opened, no human aid could be of any avail; but there are others, which, if injured, though they may be secured by a person who has a knowledge of the parts, that sort of knowledge which can be obtained only by actual dissection, yet would be attended with fatal consequences in the hands of a practitioner who is destitute of that knowledge. By coming in contact with a nail, or from any one of a variety of causes, an artery may be opened, and if the assistance of one who knows the latitude and longitude of the vessel so injured, be not at hand, the situation of the sufferer is awful indeed. What can a person, who is ignorant of anatomy, do in these circumstances? He will be glad to get away from the presence of the individual so wounded; with a physiognomy, to delineate which, would require the pencil of a Hogarth or a Wilkie: he leaves the patient to his fate, indicating his perilous condition, and his inability to save him. But if the sufferer has the good fortune to be attended by an anatomist, he, without shrinking, advances towards the awful spectacle—the patient is bathed in his own blood, his artereal system has almost been drained—a little longer, and the piston shall have ascended for the last time, in the fountain of vitality: the horrid haggard form of death is in waiting to lay hold on him, when the anatomist lays his thumb, or finger, on the artery, and arrests the hemorrhage; and by a few cautious strokes of the scalpel, he exposes the bleeding orifice, hooks it out, secures it, and the patient is saved. It may be supposed that we have been colouring, that we have overcharged our picture—it is only what may be witnessed every day in some spot of his Majesty's dominions. Were we desirous of working on the feelings, did we wish to harrow up the soul, by presenting to the imagination scenes of real misery, and of far greater magnitude, we could decorate our canvass with colours of a darker and a

deeper shade. We could lead you in retrospect to many blood-stained fields, such as Talavera and Salamanca—a Vittoria and a Waterloo—there would we pourtray in sad reality myriads of gallant men, stretched on the bloody heath, thousands of whom never could have returned to enliven the family circle, to greet their kindred, or clasp the hands of their little ones, had it not been for the assistance rendered them, by the anatomical knowledge, and skill of the men who studied anatomy, not only in defiance of public opinion, but some of them it may be, by having made a breach, through the inexpedient laws of their country. Are we to be reminded, that these events ought only to be spoken of as tales of olden times; in that case, we would conduct you in prospective to those same fields, where, judging from the present aspect of our political horizon, drawing our augury from that dark, thickening, and portentous cloud, which overhangs our hemisphere, there is reason to dread, that bloody strife is again about to be exhibited, and that thousands more of our countrymen may, ere long, fall and suffer in defence of the liberties of Man.* Now, granting that you are steeled to all the softer sympathies of our nature; that the milk of human kindness has found no residence in your breast; there is a principle remaining (which philosophers and sages have asserted exists in every human being,) to which we make our appeal; this is the selfish principle; though you may be deaf to the groans and entreaties of those whose business, and glory it is, to turn the battle from our gates, yet in as much as a well qualified medical department, has not only a direct tendency to stem the tide of human woe, but at the same time to secure the victory, we believe that every principle of humanity is on our side, when we maintain, that accurate anatomical knowledge, is necessary on the part of surgical practitioners. But it has been alleged, that there are enough, and more than enough, of medical practitioners in the country at present; this may be true, for any thing we

* March, 1823, when these remarks were first made.

know, but it affects not the point at issue ; an active campaign would take off the surplus of those who have acquired a competent knowledge of anatomy, and even admitting that we are never more to be alarmed by the din of arms, that the scythe of death, as wielded by the demon War, is never again to sweep over, and lay desolate the fair face of nature, it alters not the question before us. A few years, and all who have been qualified to act well their parts in the medical profession, shall have passed from the theatre of this busy world. We are still pressed by our opponents with the assertion, that subjects may be procured without having recourse to the practice of lifting the dead. In the first place, they say, that a supply may be had from the gallows ; and, in the second place, that medical men may give themselves, their wives, and children, and all their kindred for dissection. With regard to the legal supply, it ought to be recollected, that only those who are executed for the crime of murder, are given for dissection ; and to the honour of our country be it said, that even in this populous district, several years frequently elapse, without a single subject being procurable from that source, so that the legal supply is little better than a nonentity.

As to the other means of supply, *i. e.* that medical men should give themselves and their families for dissection, the most suitable answer to the proposal would be a quotation from Hudibras or Dean Swift, were not the subject too grave to admit of burlesque. We would just observe, that as to the members of the medical profession giving themselves and their relations for dissection, it is just as ridiculous, and quixotic, and impracticable, in as far as relates to the probability of its ever being carried into effect, as the famous plan, of the not less famous captain Bobadil for destroying an army.

But it has been said, “ that admitting you cannot procure subjects from any other source, it is still unjustifiable to lift the dead, because it is an immoral action.”

But how can that action be immoral, which leads to the alleviation of suffering and the preservation of life ; how can that action be immoral which does injury to no one ? It hurts not

the body, for it is not susceptible of injury, and it affects not the feelings of those who never hear of the transaction ; for be it remembered, that to establish our position, it is not incumbent upon us to vindicate those ill-concerted proceedings, which tend not only to harass individual feeling, but even to excite popular commotion : and far less are we chargeable with the creation of those disagreeable sensations, which have been excited by those unseemly gazettes that occasionally issue from the press, after the storming of a dissecting room, or the capture of a subject. What then, it will be asked, are the circumstances in which we maintain that exhumation is justifiable ? To this query we reply, that seeing all the objections of our opponents have been disposed of, that of feeling alone excepted, we might tell them, that taking our stand on the basis of utility, feeling ought to succumb to utility, in the case of exhumation, as much as in that of public executions, where the stroke of death is inflicted on criminals for the purpose of promoting the general good. But even of this argument we will not take advantage, we are not devoid of feeling ourselves, and we have respect to the feelings of others ; but we call on our opponents to prove that we are wrong, when we affirm, that it is justifiable, (so long as subjects cannot be procured from any other source,) and where the lifting of the dead is had recourse to for the purpose of scientific investigation, and when by the prudent management of those who conduct the enterprise, it is accomplished without being known to any, except those who will turn it to the general good.

This is not giving our sanction to the detestable doctrine, that what is unknown to us, can be productive of no injury. It is not a recognition of the old Spartan law relative to theft, which considered it to be criminal only when detected. The lifting of the dead in some circumstances, is no venial transaction ; it is an exception to a general rule ; it is not doing evil, that good may come. Let our opponents then insist no longer on the immorality of the action, when performed in the circumstances which we have pointed out. There

have been many complaints on the score of morality, as connected with this question ; but however unpalatable the doctrine may be to some, we hesitate not to aver, that in our opinion, the individual who contracts debt, intending not to redeem it ; he who utters a falsehood, knowing it to be such ; the person who invents or propagates the tale of slander, for the purpose of injuring his neighbour, in fortune or reputation : he who is a delinquent in all, or one of these particulars, is an infinitely worse member of society ; he makes a far greater breach in the code of morality, than those, who, that they may be enabled to assuage the pangs, and pour the balm of consolation into the cup of human sorrows, countenance in some circumstances, the lifting of the dead.

It has been alleged, that “ anatomists are not only felons in fact, but they derive pleasure from the work of dissection.” The latter assertion, paradoxical as it may seem, is true, and it is false ; animadversion on it, though not necessary for the establishment of our position, for that we have already secured, is due in justice to those who have been wantonly accused. To assert, that pondering over the most hideous and loathsome of spectacles, and that to the hazard of life itself ; to say that the contemplation of such scenes, affords pleasure to the anatomist, in the sense implied by those who bring forward the accusation, is a base and a foul calumny. The anatomist may, and does derive pleasure from his investigations ; and that pleasure may even equal in degree, but it is diametrically opposite in kind, to that which is felt by the savage while he drinks the blood from the scull of his enemy ; neither is it pleasure similar to that experienced by the sensualist, the bacchanalian, or debauchee, while exulting amid the scenes of midnight revelry ; nor yet is it pleasure so ignoble in its kind, (if it must be called pleasure,) as that enjoyed by the miser when gazing on his hoards of gold.

The pleasure accruing to the scientific anatomist, emanates from a higher and a purer source ; it is kindred in its nature to that which solaced and supported the mind of a Howard, while traversing the abodes of human wretchedness, and while

exploring the dungeons of his own and of foreign lands ; to whose memory a monument has been reared, not only on the far distant spot, where his ashes repose, but in the heart of every human being who has heard of his achievements, and is not callous to the finer and better feelings of our nature. And think you not that the late Dr. Gordon of Edinburgh, and Mr. Dease, recently Professor of Anatomy in Dublin, and others who have fallen victims—early and lamented victims to anatomical studies—were men who, instead of being calumniated as felons, and ranked with the basest and vilest of our species, are more worthy of a place in our esteem, of a niche in our fondest recollections, than those who have been the conquerors and destroyers of man, and whose feats have been emblazoned in the chronicles of fame.

We cannot close these remarks, without adverting to the necessity of something being done towards the attainment of an object so deeply connected with the prosperity of the anatomical institutions of this island. It is not science alone, that will suffer by a continuance of the present difficulties incident to the study of anatomy. The lives of his Majesty's subjects will be subjected to a needlessly precarious risking of that which is most dear and valuable on earth—health, without which, enjoyment is but a name. Let our legislators but turn their attention to the question, and they will certainly perceive the necessity of adopting measures to supply the anatomical institutions of our country with subjects for dissection.

We would suggest, that all who forfeit their lives to the laws of their country ; all who die in the hulks, (overseers of course excepted) ; all who die in our hospitals, and remain for a stated time unclaimed, should be given for dissection ; or let us have an importation, sufficient to supply all our institutions, at a price.

Among the many who compose the first legislative assembly in the world, are there none who can encounter the scowl of public opinion, and bring this interesting topic before the grand council of the empire ?